Castlemaine Naturalist

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Castlemaine Spider Orchid *C. clavescens*
- Photo by Noel Young

Rescuing Rare Orchids

Rita Mills

It would seem an impossible task to bring some of our threatened orchid species back from the brink of extinction, but Geoff Neville, a Threatened Species Officer of the DSE is one of a team which is trying to do just that.

In his talk at the last meeting, he highlighted orchids which they are working with, including our own Crimson Spider Orchid, which range in numbers from one or two specimens to some hundreds from several areas.

Of around 380 species of orchid in Victoria, 197 are listed as threatened and 50 as endangered. He discussed some of the local rarities including the McIvor Spider, Bendigo Spider, Red Cross Spider, Stuart Mill Spider, Brilliant Sun Orchid, Yellow-lip Spider, and of course our own Castlemaine Spider (*Caladenia clavescens*) which has gone by several names, but this one is now official.

New species are still being found: recent examples in the region include the Northern Golden Moths *Diuris protera,* Sutton Grange Greenhood *Pterostylis sp. Affin. bicolor* found only here, Metcalfe and Maldon, and the Lowly Greenhood at Maryborough and St. Arnaud

Some are threatened because of clearing or grazing; for some it is not certain whether there were ever only a few specimens, but the propagation method applied is similar in all cases. Seed is gathered, and the gatherer has to be on the alert as to when it will be ripe and ready, as it can't be gathered until then. Often, rather than rely on the normal

pollinator, the scientist has had to hand-pollinate the flower, which isn't quite so simple and straight-forward as hand-pollinating pumpkins!

Next the correct mycorrhizal fungus has to be collected from a special collar above the "tuber", preferably from another plant of the same species from the same area, but when there are only one or two specimens available this luxury is denied. These are placed in a special growing mixture in the laboratory, and then the waiting begins to see if any of the seed was viable. In some cases there has been a good rate of success, and plants are eventually ready to re-introduce into the wild, but not before a study has been done to ensure that the correct pollinators are present in the correct type of habitat.

To identify the pollinator, DNA sequencing is now being used to match pollen collected from an insect to a specific orchid. The pollinator can be very specific; in the case of the Castlemaine Spider Orchid, it was found to be an undescribed species of wasp captured at Harcourt and Taradale.

Castlemaine Spiders (Crimson Spider) near Castlemaine in 2007. Colour varies from a pale mode shown here to a dark blood red. - Photo Noel Young

At the moment no work on cloning has been done in Victoria as there has been in Western Australia, and Geoff said that one of the drawbacks of this kind of propagation is that it doesn't allow for a good gene pool to be established.

I found his talk and presentation extremely interesting, and think I understand a little more of what is being attempted by the Threatened Species Network.

Connecting Country begins a new phase

Noel Young

The CFNC has had a strong interest in the "Connecting Country" project since its inauguration in 2007 under the guidance of FOBIF and funding by the Norman Wettenhall Foundation. Its initial aim was to establish a geographic database of local biodiversity (the "biodiversity blueprint") with direct contributions from anyone with local knowledge or records, adding to primary information sources for the Shire of Mt Alexander, then use this to "break down barriers, open up exciting new ways of teaming up to link and restore our fragmented and fragile landscape"

Julie von Platen was employed in 2008 to gather all available information and to "pool all local, scientific and agency knowledge into an interactive database." The biodiversity blueprint would "suggest directions, clarify our priorities in landscape restoration and help us to reconcile cultural, agricultural and natural values"

Not just a successful information gathering exercise, the project has developed a sophisticated interactive website on which not only can the ecological mapping data be viewed, but anyone can contribute site information, photos etc, on an ongoing basis.

Recently, Connecting Country has been re-constituted to an incorporated body as explained on the FOBIF website -

> "Fobif's aims in overseeing the project so far have been achieved, and we have been keen for it now to be constituted as an independent body, representative of all groups in the Mount Alexander shire involved in landscape restoration. The incorporation meeting took place at Buda on June 29, where sixty people supported motions that the group become Connecting Country (Mount Alexander Region), Inc"

Expressions of interest are currently being sought for a full time Project

Manager (applications close 18th August. See website below) So, Connecting Country marches on with renewed vigour, and has been established as perhaps the most advanced project of this type in the country. Interesting to note that its emblem right from the start has been the Castlemaine Spider Orchid.

Check it out at -
www.connectingcountry.org.au

Birding the By-ways

Rita Mills

I'd decided that there were so few birds on our latest trip to Grafton in April that it wasn't worth writing anything about the trip for the CN after all. However, I decided to enter a list into the computer, just to see how many species we actually saw and identified and found there were 97 altogether (there were 4 or 5 "90% sure" but I didn't include them). But there were many kilometers traveled when we didn't see a single bird that I could identify, and again as on the last two trips, we saw very few flying across the road in front of us which of course, is what I always expected in "the old days".

However, there were other places where there were good numbers, and if we had had time to stop for an hour or two, and just sit and watch, I'm sure we would have added to the list. Where there was water we found birds of course, like the numerous Little Egrets that we saw on the swamps (in the rain!) near the mouth of the Clarence River at Yamba, and along the river itself further inland.

Some of my special finds were a small flock of red tailed Black Cockatoos which proved to be Glossy Black Cockatoos at a little township between Casino and Tenterfield. Simon confirmed that when he was staying with

us, as he told me that at Mallanganee that's what they would have to be. I got quite a good list there as we sat at a picnic table and ate a home-made Mallanganee pie for lunch. These are sold in the front room of a little cottage which has been turned into a little shop by the elderly owner (she'd be as old as me!) and made by her too I gather. Certainly they are made in the township. It was a place full of little surprises.

I saw the male Satin Bowerbird at Jackadgerrie, Scaly Lorrikeets in South Grafton shopping centre, Grey-crowned Babblers which we watched for about 10 minutes and I photographed while forgetting all about making a cup of tea, at a crossing near a small place south east of Moree called Terry Hie Hie (I couldn't resist detouring through a place with a name like that!), Bar-shouldered and Peaceful Doves near Barradine, and we were sent to a lovely little spot on the northern side of the Warrumbungles by a local, (2 km down Morrissey Road if you happen to be up that way) and found lots of bush birds, including Double-barred and Red-browed Finches, and some of the few wrens we saw for the trip, which proved to be Superb Blue, the same as at home. The only other wrens we saw for the trip were Variegated which were at the caravan park in South Grafton. The only Robin Species we saw were the Red-capped Robins and we saw very few of those. We did see good numbers of White-winged Choughs, Apostlebirds, Cockatiel. and at the Cabin Park at Coonabarrabran, lots of Noisy, and a few Little Friarbirds all noisily drinking from the blocked roof gutter of one of the units.

We detoured through Balranald and the Grampians on the way home, and somewhere near Donald spotted my last "special" birds, a pair of Banded Lapwings.

Greenhood Discoveries

Noel Young

In the last week of July, I had two tip-offs from committee members who had found orchids on their explorations. The first was from Denis Hurley, who found an isolated clump of Tall Greenhoods on Youngmans Track, growing through a low patch of vegetation which seemed to be affording them some sort of protection close to the edge of the road.

Rita Mills checked out the spot where we had found buds of Pterostylis robusta on the Captains Gully Road excursion in June (see her article last month) and reported some mature flower heads.

Both occurrences turned out to yield good photogenic specimens.

Large Striped Greenhood *Pterostylis robusta* at Captains Gully rd. July 31

Large Autumn Greenhood - for comparison with *robusta*

Tall Greenhood *P. longifolia* along Youngmans Tk.

[photos – Noel Young]

From the business meeting

Welcome to new members: Janet Gilmore, Barbara Guerin, Kate and John Caraher

The **roadside clean-up** on July 18th was a great success. 13 participants picked up a large amount of rubbish. The next clean-up is scheduled for October 24th.

Observations

- Dianne Thompson observed Brown headed Honeyeaters in the garden
- Lots of Whistling Kite activity at Guildford, a pair of Wedge tailed Eagles eating a rabbit in the paddock – and a friend reports seeing a Collared Sparrowhawk or Brown Goshawk with prey above St Marys school in Templeton St. – Natasha Harris
- Debbie Worland noted a report that Striated and Spotted Pardalotes have disappeared from Bendigo, but they are still present around the Castlemaine golf course and Muckleford generally.
- Denis Hurley reports that Speckled Warblers have been seen around his garden (normally absent in winter)
- July 2 – Large flock (150-200) Corella in Happy Valley, and July 3 – a small flock of Red-browed Finches alighted briefly on the lawn, and were immediately joined by local sparrows which seemed to hassle them off. July 4 – six Pied Currawongs in the yard picking at the remains of apples - Noel Young
- Grey Currawongs eating berries of saltbush – Rita Mills
- Striated Thornbills at berries near the house – Anne van Gemert
- Blue Wrens and New Holland Honeyeaters around the house lately – Natalie de Maccus
- And some recent sightings by Richard Piesse -

  14 June in southern Brisbane Ranges: Two Scarlet Robins, Wedge tailed Eagle, and a Koala guarding our lunch time picnic area

  22 June in valley of Moonee Ponds Ck. Wetland areas south of Broadmeadows: Black Swans, Swamphens, Native hens, Coots, Wood Ducks, Black Ducks, two Cormorants, White faced Heron.

  2 July in Kororoit Ck – scores of White Ibis in old River Red Gums behind the Deer Park Hotel.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the club

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Programme
August 2009

Fri Aug 14th meeting: MICHAEL MARMACH: The Bogong High Plains

Sat Aug 15th field trip: Youngmans Track area

Fri Sept 11th meeting: BETH GOTT: Wild Food

Fri Oct 9th meeting: ERN PERKINS: Eucalypts

Fri Nov 13th meeting: DR MARY COLE: Mycorrhizae and Environmental Health

VISITORS ARE WELCOME AT CLUB ACTIVITIES

General meetings - (second Friday of each month, except January) are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) Hall (enter from Lyttleton St.) at 8.00 pm.
Field Trips - (Saturday following the general meeting) leave from the car park opposite Castle Motel, Duke Street at 1.30pm sharp unless stated otherwise. BYO morning and/or afternoon tea. Outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions. There are NO excursions on total fire ban days.
Business meetings - fourth Thursday of each month, except December, at Natalies; 65 Johnstone Street, at 7.30 pm. All members are invited to attend.

Subscriptions for 2009
Ordinary membership: Single $27, Family $35
Pensioner or student: Single $24, Family $29
Subscription includes postage of the monthly newsletter, Castlemaine Naturalist

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